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< Chapter Twenty-one: Solo solo-ii-1600285/) **Chapter Twenty-one: Solo** III

Just a few days ago.

A clumsy, though sweet, melody
caressed my ears.

I was sitting several meters away,
watching her back rise and fall with the

motion of her arms. I sank into the backrest of one of those soft armchairs in the modest music room of our house and looked around. Three tall double windows opened onto the inner courtyard, draped in long red curtains. Aside from my chair, there were many others, arranged in such a strange way it seemed almost accidental. Two elegant wooden doors led to the eastern hallway on the second floor... which made me wonder: how had they gotten the piano into the room?

A damn piano, seriously. There's nothing this house doesn't have. If I had been the owner, I would've chosen to stay and survive here rather than abandon my home and leave all of this behind.

...

No, that's a lie.

A lonely chandelier hung from the ceiling, casting light across the room and pushing back the kind of darkness that comes with a winter night. I let my eyes fall on her again. Angelique tapped the keys softly with her fingertips, bringing

music to life.

She and I discovered her ability entirely by accident. One day, while we were cleaning, she sat down and began playing a song like it was the most normal thing in the world. I didn't ask, but clearly, she had no memory of ever playing before. Why, reader? Muscle memory, maybe? I don't know, and I don't care.

She quickened the pace, maybe by mistake, or maybe because that was how the tune echoed faintly in her head.

I know nothing about music. Absolutely nothing. I never had a favorite band or artist like my classmates did—I just listened to whatever they liked.

Even so, I could tell some of the notes sounded... off, like they didn't belong in the same piece.

Is that what they call playing out of tune?

A few seconds later, she stopped, letting her hands fall on the keys with mild frustration. I stood and walked over to her. I placed my hands on her shoulders and

rested my chin on her head.

"What was that?"

"It doesn't sound right. I don't remember it well."

"I think it sounded good."

"Yeah, but..."

"But...?"

"Not how it should. I messed up a lot."

"Hm..."

I stretched a hand toward the piano and pressed a few keys at random. I was a little surprised when they made no sound.

"That's not how it works."

"What did I do wrong?"

"You have to press harder."

She gently pushed my hand aside and, to show me, pressed those same keys with enough force to make them work properly.

"The hammers need to strike the strings hard to make them vibrate. If you just press the keys lightly, you won't hear anything."

"Strings? What strings?"

Angelique thought for a moment, then let out a breath that turned into a laugh.

"The piano's a string instrument. When you hit a key, you're actually hitting the strings that make the notes."

"Did you read that somewhere?"

"No."

Without warning, she let herself fall slightly back, resting her head against my stomach so she could look up at me. She was smiling beautifully.

"I just know."

May, 2024

A year and a half of solitude.

I walked south until there was no land left beneath my feet. I wasn't sure what I was after. I wasn't even sure I was seeking anything at all. There were plenty of chances to stop and settle. Nearly empty towns still holding life, abandoned houses silently offering themselves to be lived in, communes that would've welcomed me with open arms...

I never stopped.

When the sea blocked my way, I simply followed the coastline, like a marble keeping its momentum as it rolled along a gentle curve. I clashed with bandits and Amere fighters, traded with civilians and threatened some, picked up fragments of the language by distracting myself at night with magazines or books found in whatever place I used as shelter, ran from the bigger battles...

A commune had taken root in Reggio Calabria. Amere's presence was overwhelming, their grip over the city complete. The irony was that such

domination brought peace. As long as you didn't rebel or disobey, you were safe. They didn't even strip residents of their weapons—whether because they didn't fear uprising or because they avoided antagonizing the population, I couldn't say. The most shocking thing was boarding the ferry to Sicily without having to surrender my arms. No questions, no interference. They allowed the city to function almost normally. In hindsight, that told me everything.

From the southern coast of Sicily, I saw the island of Malta in the distance. All of Sicily belonged to Amere. Heaven knows how large their forces were, but anyone thinking of reclaiming the island would need to be ready to face resistance fit for a whole nation. They weren't concerned about a lone madman carrying a rifle. Everything was under control. Everything.

So I turned back.

Could I have lived a quiet life if I'd just tried to blend into that community in Sicily? The city ran smoothly. Food, work,

shelter—it would've been easy to adapt to the local rhythm.

But I didn't want that. A part of me felt nothing but bitterness toward the faction that had taken everything from me. It might sound strange, but scavenging through trash sounded more appealing than surrendering to the comfortable complacency they offered.

I retraced the coast, boarded the ferry once again. Recalled every step I had taken and walked them backward—same cities, same towns. It took me months, long months filled with violence and despair.

I knew it would happen eventually. It was only a matter of time. My luck dried up. No food, no supplies, and nearly no ammunition.

By the time I reached the border between Italy and Slovenia, I hadn't eaten in days. My body felt brittle, and I could feel how the long months of deprivation had worn down my endurance. I was light, weak, sluggish, soft.

I stared ahead, aimless. Stones and trees

watched me pass, wondering if I'd soon become one of them. The rifle on my back felt far too heavy for a weapon with six, maybe seven rounds left.

Headaches became a constant—dehydration and malnourishment. My arms couldn't even lift my pistol without straining. But when death drew near, I found the strength somewhere deep within, summoned by sheer will to survive.

My 92's barrel still smoked, aimed at the skull of a bandit I had just encountered in an alley near the Gorizia–Nova Gorica crossing. Just bracing for the recoil had drained me. My arm throbbed, fingers trembled. I looked down at my own hand. My skin was dry, losing elasticity—not a good sign.

Like a doctor tending to a wounded child, I crouched over the body, checking his pockets. He had no backpack. Pants, coat, inner layers... nothing. Nothing I could use. If he had a stash somewhere, it was out of my reach—and not worth the time or energy it'd cost to search for it.

I sat on the ground, despondent, eyes fixed on the bullet hole I'd left in his head. Blood didn't spurt; it streamed in a steady flow across his brown skin. His face was no longer recognizable, just red. I looked lower, toward the puddle forming beneath.

Blood...

Then, I thought about it.

I swear I did.

I swear on Angelique, I considered it.

No one was around. No one to see, to judge.

If I just... silenced my humanity, and gave in to survival instinct...

If I satisfied the need and then forgot...

I set my pistol down and picked up the knife the man had tucked into the back of his pants.

I began sweating, panting.

Grabbing the corpse's wrist, I extended his arm, turning it slightly so the inside of the elbow faced up. I lowered the knife, pressed it gently to the skin, and began

applying pressure.

I froze as the blood started to trickle.

It was strange—violence hadn't scared me in a long time. But maybe it was the realization of what I was about to do. I buried the blade further. More blood surged. I stopped again, bile rising in my throat. Slowly, I turned my head—and met his dead, open eyes. Facing me. Maybe challenging me.

Panic surged.

I yanked the knife away and bit my lip so hard it bled.

I had nearly eaten human flesh. My mind had toyed with the idea of cooking it, devouring it quickly, without tasting, just to ease the hunger and preserve some shred of sanity. But no—no mind could endure that. None should. No man could do such a thing and stay whole. I couldn't be that man. I couldn't end like that.

I kept the knife, took my pistol, and crawled out of the alley. Forced myself to stand once I reached the street.

There was nothing. No one. The whole world had ceased to exist; only I remained. The sky was overcast, and experience told me rain would soon follow. I couldn't move. For a second, I believed this might be my final resting place.

I could surrender to the fatigue, let myself fall, let time consume me like the wind takes leaves—but when the first drop hit my nose, instinct once again gripped me by the throat and made me walk.

Each step was leaden, worn, exhausted. I stumbled into a house, indistinguishable from the rest.

I stood with the help of the doorframe, the door swinging open under my weight. One glance told me there'd be nothing useful in that forsaken place. Damp walls and floors, cigarette butts, plastic bags and wrappers everywhere. Not inhabited, but clearly used as shelter before.

No furniture remained—only fragments. Whether those who'd stayed were driven out at gunpoint or left of their own will, only the walls knew.

I left the door open and stepped into the living room. Lightning briefly lit the space. A thunderclap followed.

I searched every drawer and shelf in the front room and kitchen. Papers, utensils, souvenirs, photographs, ashes, stones, shell casings, shattered glass, soiled bandages, a broken revolver in a corner... nothing useful.

I returned to the entrance and looked around once more, the space still lit occasionally by distant flashes.

...

Were those scraps of life—or fragments of time?

I'd judged them worthless so quickly, but...

Why, then, did my chest ache at the thought?

Most papers were notes survivors had likely written to communicate while away. Kitchen utensils were worn but intact, clearly once used daily. The souvenirs were simple, the cheap kind tourists buy for

coins—yet dozens of them were scattered, many broken. The photographs belonged to the house's original family. A large one—parents, two children, elders, maybe close relatives. The ashes were newer. The wind had scattered them, but most had piled in a single spot. Likely the remains of indoor campfires for warmth. Same with the stones. The casings were a mystery. Had they been fired to scare away refugees—or had refugees used them to kill the original owners? I didn't want to know. The glass came from windows in both rooms I'd seen. Nearly all were broken, patched with plastic and tape. The used, blood-stained bandages sat piled on the kitchen counter. They may have saved someone's life—or been the last thing they wore.

The revolver... an old model I couldn't place. Its hammer jammed, trigger limp.

All of it was life. A vast, sprawling history told through debris left by who knows how many since this nightmare began. The good, the bad—remains didn't differentiate. They just lay there, bare and

honest. The universe had passed through that house.

Someone once told me we're all within each other.

Did that mean what I saw was a reflection of my own essence? Of who I was, or had been, or would become? What should I feel? Pity? Anger? Sympathy? Compassion?

I closed the door from the inside. Whatever the case, I needed rest.

And... if I truly was doomed to die of hunger, then that house didn't seem like a bad place to breathe my last.

I gathered stones, made a circle on the tiles. Threw in splinters of furniture and old paper, then lit a fire to warm my hands and clothes.

Minutes later, my stomach howled again. It hurt, badly.

I figured I had nothing to lose by checking the rest of the house. Maybe, just maybe, I'd get lucky. Anything—canned peas, even expired.

Pistol in hand, I searched each room. Of course, all were wrecked, looted the same. Bedroom windows hadn't even been boarded. Rain leaked freely, soaking the floors.

Drawers, wardrobes, closets—empty.

Then, the last room surprised me with its condition. A child's room, no older than ten. Toys and posters told me that much.

Defeated, I sank into the still-soft bed and weighed my options. It wasn't over, not yet. Houses nearby. Shops. Something had to be there. Even a spoiled can of beans. I couldn't give up—not until I knew what I was really searching for. Not until the journey meant something.

Listlessly, I picked up one toy with my left hand. A dinosaur. I'd collected those too.

Memories of childhood returned. Peaceful. Carefree. The average kid. I thought of my father smoking by the window, my mother cooking dinner, me arranging my toys after another lazy

summer afternoon.

Nostalgia is strange. Why do happy memories hurt? Paradoxical. We should rejoice—but...

I placed the dinosaur back where it was. Didn't want the child to return and find it touched without permission.

I stood and left. Hungry, tired—and now, sad. I walked the hall with my gaze fixed to the floor, but soon stopped

Rubbed my eyes with a hand.

What was the point of it all? Why was this happening? How much longer? Where was that child? Where were his parents? Where was the child I once was? Where were my parents?

...

Where were my parents?

A darkness as deep as the void swelled in my chest.

So much pain. Given, taken.

I wasn't going to kill myself. I wasn't giving up. I wanted to live, that much was clear. Above all, I wanted to see another

sunrise. To believe in a better future.

That had to be true.

Everything screamed for resignation—
but I didn't like that idea. I wouldn't follow
that thought.

Of course not.

Had I never met Angelique, then...

...

I lifted my head. The only closed door
nearby stood before me. White wood, but
not pure.

Out of habit more than hope, I turned
the handle and slowly pushed.

As it opened, the dim light through the
windows revealed terror itself. Eyes,
lifeless yet aware, stared back. Death's
gaze. A stare exhausted, spent, brutal,
merciless. His pupils pierced straight
through me, dissecting my being,
understanding and unraveling me in a
breath. That red gaze felt nothing. No
sorrow, no pity. It simply was—and
pursued one thing: death. His own,
others', the world's. The end of all. All was

there. All ended there. If we are all in each other, then his death gaze was the death of all things.

Fear.

Terror gripped me.

I was utterly at his mercy. That fear—to die—was the clearest proof that I still desperately wanted to live.

He moved. Wordless, he raised his pistol and aimed.

Of course, I did the same. But it was pointless. He had the upper hand. He was faster.

I shut my eyes and pulled the trigger—

But only one shot rang out.

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I felt like I had kept my eyes shut for hours.

I waited for the finishing blow. For him, standing in complete dominance, to end my life without so much as a drop of

sweat.

But... nothing happened. After an uncertain stretch of time, I slowly lifted my eyelids, just as a splintered, high-pitched sound reached my ears.

The man on the other side still had his weapon aimed at me, but his entire image was shattered. The bullet I had fired had struck him dead in the center of the forehead—yet his gaze remained unchanged, as if it hadn't even registered. As if he were immortal.

I lowered my hand and let the weapon fall to the floor.

Like a walking corpse, I stepped forward, surrendering myself to the abyss within those pupils. I grabbed the sink with both hands, just beneath the now-fractured mirror.

It was me.

Was it me?

It couldn't be.

If I was the one gripped by terror, completely out of my mind, how could the

man in the mirror look so... so cruel? Why didn't he feel that fear? No—why didn't that fear show on his face? Why was I the only one who had to endure the pain of being afraid, and not the reflection?!

I didn't recognize him. I didn't recognize that image. I couldn't have said with certainty that the man with a bullet lodged in his skull was me. I raised a hand and touched my own face—not the man in the mirror. That one couldn't be me.

The face was gaunt and pale, with a grown-out beard and horrible dark circles.

What would my mother say if she saw me like this?

To think...

To think there would come a day when I could no longer recognize myself in the mirror...

I stayed there for a while, thinking. I checked the faucet—water still trickled out. Behind the mirror cabinet, I found an old can of shaving cream, probably untouched for years. The texture wasn't great, but it would do. I applied it to my

face, rinsed the knife in that filthy water,
and carefully, stroke by stroke, shaved.

I rinsed my face, braced myself, and
looked up again.

That same gaze was still there, waiting
for me.

I turned my head slightly, trying to get a
better look.

Still not me.

But now... now he at least resembled the
man I once was.

Just a few days ago.

Angelique tried again.

I find it utterly charming to watch her so
focused.

It was the fourth time she attempted to
play the same piece without, as she put it,
making a mistake. I stood nearby now,
much closer than before, watching her
slender fingers glide over the piano keys. It
was so... comforting.

With a single blink, those white wings

appeared on her back. They were so close, within reach. Maybe that was the perfect moment to stretch out my hand and touch them—but doing so would interrupt her performance. I couldn't bring myself to do that. Resigned, I turned to the window, and the glass returned my reflection. That slightly thin face, still with dark circles, a scar, and a faint smile...

That was me.

"Ah..."

The final note rang out, followed by Angelique's soft sigh. I turned back to her, and, as I'd expected, her wings had vanished.

"That sounded good."

"Yeah... I didn't mess up this time. The tempo could use some work, but..."

"But?"

"But it's an improvement. Still, I need to keep practicing."

"Hm... well, I don't think Franz Grillparzer became a master by skipping meals to practice. I'm hungry, Angelique, let's..."

Angel slowly turned her head to look up at me with a hint of confusion, tinged with a faint trace of disapproval. She thought for a moment, brought a hand to her chin, and then tilted her head slightly to the side.

"Alez..."

"What?"

"Wasn't it Schubert?"

"Hm? Who?"

Her eyebrows arched outward. Uncertain of her own conclusion, but clearly convinced that I was wrong.

"Grillparzer was a writer. I think... I think you meant Franz Schubert. He was the musician."

I pressed my lips together tightly. I had no idea whether she was right or not, but the confidence in her tone made me feel like a fool.

"Eh..."

"Pff..."

She lowered her head and tried her best not to laugh. I bit my tongue and gave her a weak but audible pat on the back.

"Yeah, I guess. I don't care—I'm neither a musician nor a writer. Can we go eat now?"

She managed to compose herself and stood in front of me, still letting out a choppy laugh with every breath.

"Y-yes, let's go. I... I'll cook today, Alez."

"Whatever you want..."

With a noisy—and I'm sure deliberately exaggerated—sigh, relishing the pleasure of having 'won' yet again, she straightened her posture and looked up at me. Those eyes, as dull as they were brimming with life, looked into mine with a warmth that was uniquely hers.

"What do you feel like eating today, Alez?"

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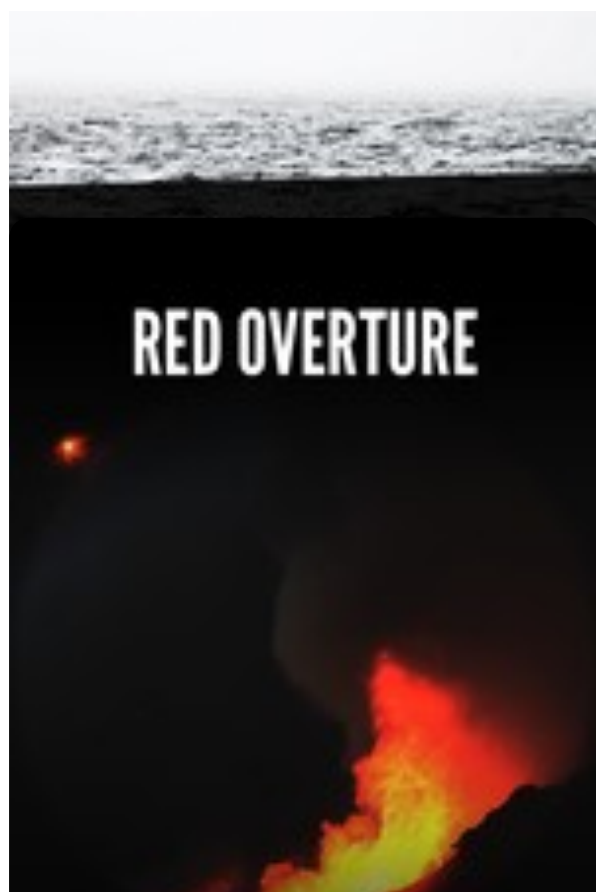
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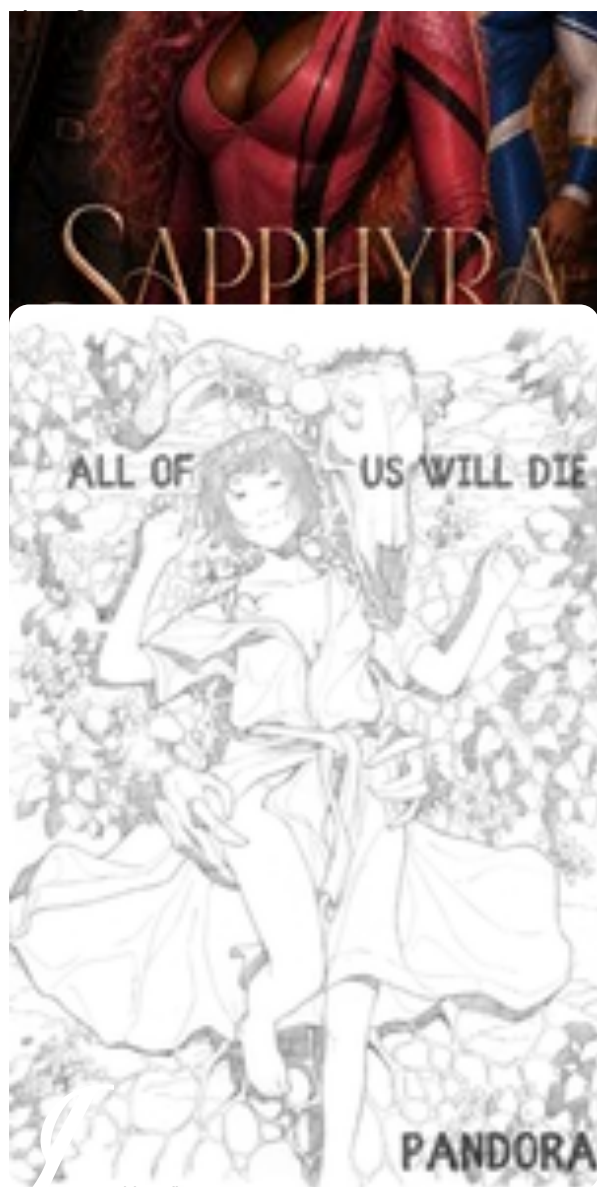
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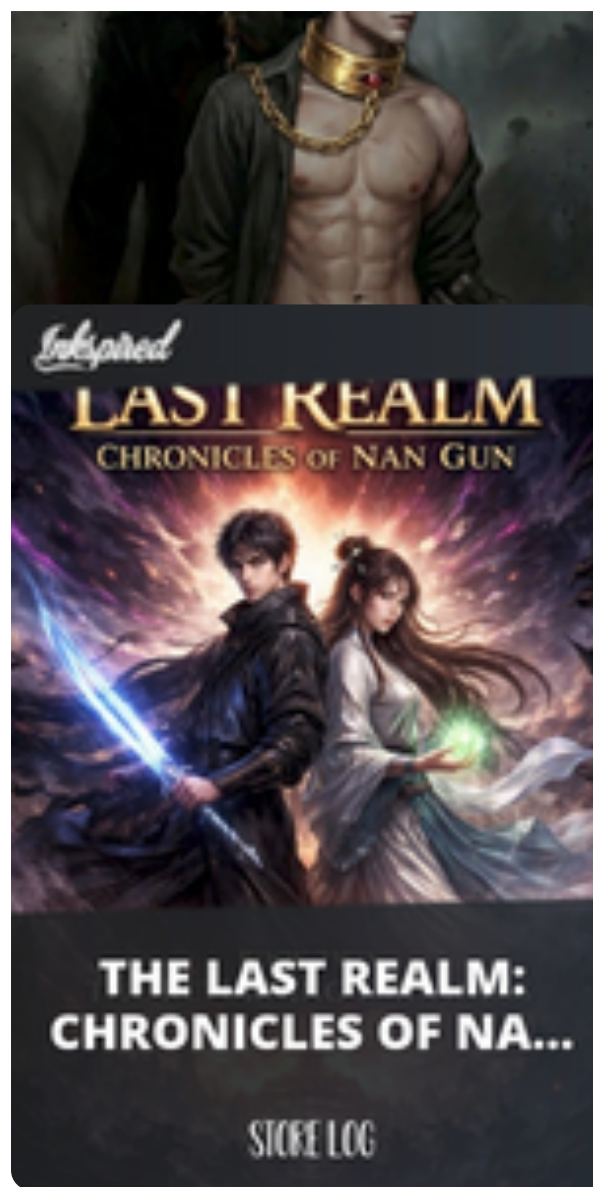
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